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### On the Genealogy of Obscenity: Naked Lunch and The Death of Obscene Literature

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18 April 2014

On the Genealogy of Obscenity: *Naked Lunch* and The Death of Obscene Literature

**The Court:** Mr. Ginsberg, do you consider that this book is obscene?

**Allen Ginsberg:** Not really, no, sir.

**The Court:** Well, would you be surprised if the author himself admitted it was obscene and must be necessarily obscene in order to convey his thoughts and impressions? Well, it's on page xii of the Introduction: "Since *Naked Lunch* treats this health problem [addiction], it is necessarily brutal, obscene and disgusting. Sickness is often repulsive details not for weak stomachs."

**Allen Ginsberg:** Yes, he has said that. I don't think he intends that to be obscene in any legal sense or even obscene as seen through his own eyes or through the eyes of a sympathetic reader. He is dealing with matters very basic and very frightening.  
(*'Naked Lunch' on Trial* xxi).

First made available in the United States in 1962, William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and those who ventured to sell the illicit book were brought before obscenity courts on three separate occasions within the book's first four years in print. Despite breaking a different law on each separate occasion, *Naked Lunch* was judged to be equally obscene in all three cases. However, as Allen Ginsberg's testimony during the 1966 Massachusetts State Supreme Court trial that eventually exonerated *Naked Lunch* from its prior obscenity convictions demonstrates, there exist multiple interpretations and functions of the term "obscene". The discrepancy of usage between Burroughs, Ginsberg and the Court demonstrates a fundamental characteristic of obscenity, its ambiguity. The difficulty in definitively articulating the obscene is best characterized by United States Supreme Court Justice, Potter Stewart, in his famous quote, "I shall not today attempt to further define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [pornographic]... But I know it when I see it."<sup>1</sup> Despite the transparency and moral

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<sup>1</sup> *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. 378 U.S 184. United States Supreme Court. (1964).

certitude Justice Potter assumes in his widely quoted remark, the inability of the Supreme Court to standardize or elucidate a description of the obscene beyond the subjective acts of 'knowing' and 'seeing' represents a serious lapse in an otherwise exacting mode of discourse.

To understand the significance of this lapse and to begin to gauge its influence on the critical reception of *Naked Lunch*, it is first necessary to approach the legal origins of obscenity. While the clarification of the parameters of the *Obscene Publications Act of 1957* by *Regina v Hicklin* (1868) stands as the first attempt to statutorily define and regulate obscenity, the landmark case is preceded only by the common law *Vagrancy Act of 1842*. Enacted in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the *Vagrancy Act* was a response to the potentially revolutionary threat posed by the large number of discharged soldiers left unemployed and destitute after the war. Making it a crime to beg or distribute obscene material for money, the *Vagrancy Act* also functioned as a general justification for the persecution of social outliers, such as the homeless, gay communities, sex workers, and the mentally disabled. With this legal foundation in mind, the vague nature of Justice Stewart's definition of obscenity takes on a darker hue. By remaining ill defined, accusations of obscenity function as a rhetorical veil, obscuring the reproduction of power through the marginalization of the disempowered. By pushing those with a lack of power to margins, power is reciprocally consolidated and defined by its absence. Therefore, the goal of censorship must be thought of not as the suppression of obscenity, but as the fortification and delineation of the contours of power.

As such, the genealogy of obscenity, when traced outwards from its point of legal origin, locates *Naked Lunch* on a larger historical trajectory that maps the impact of

censorship on the production of literature. Central to this trajectory has been the use of progressive metaphors to justify and conceal otherwise repressive policies and actions.

Applying the notion of the disciplinary society to the question of obscenity, Michel Foucault contextualizes literary censorship within a broader spectrum of coercive state violence.

Arguing;

“Historically, the process by which the bourgeoisie became in the course of the eighteenth century the politically dominant class was masked by the establishment of an explicit, coded and formally egalitarian juridical framework, made possible by the organization of a parliamentary, representative regime. But the development and generalization of disciplinary mechanisms constituted the other, dark side of these processes. The general juridical form that guaranteed a system of rights that were egalitarian in principle was supported by these tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms, by all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the disciplines.”  
(*Discipline and Punish* 222)

Foucault supplies an analogical model for the analysis of the disciplinary nature of the obscenity trial and its legal/critical marginalization of *Naked Lunch*. It is of no little importance then, that Foucault’s identification of the eighteenth century as the seat of discipline also happens to coincide with the advent of the censorship of commercial publishing and the legal recognition of the author by *The Statute of Anne* (1709).<sup>2</sup> Initially a mechanism of political and economic control, censorship regulation was first enforced to protect the commercial dominance of the Stationer’s Company of London.<sup>3</sup> Touted as copyright protection for struggling authors, “In *The Statute of Anne*, the author was

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<sup>2</sup> *The Statute of Anne* is also widely considered to be the first instance of copyright law.

<sup>3</sup> Granted a monopoly over the English booktrade, members of the Stationer’s Company were insulated from the pressures of foreign competition. Ostensibly justified by the crown’s desire to promote national stability through the suppression of treasonous content, the Stationer’s Company regulated what material its members could and could not print. Establishing guild membership as a prerequisite for publishing, censorship relied on the force of law to perpetuate existing power structures and forcibly assimilate dissenting voices.

established as a legally empowered figure in the marketplace well before professional authorship was realized in practice.” (Rose 4). Crediting the classical liberal notion of Locke’s possessive individualism as the basis for authorial ownership, influential London booksellers erected the figure of the author as a democratic symbol behind which they could continue to exercise their economic dominance with impunity. An unlikely precedent for the modern obscenity trial, “The literary-property struggle [initiated by The Statute of Anne] generated a body of texts- parliamentary records, pamphlets, and legal reports- in which aesthetic and legal questions are often indistinguishable.” (Rose 6). In this sense, obscenity trials, in an attempt to contain and validate the authority of textual interpretation, similarly engage in the construction of an authorial figure behind whom the court is free to engage in reductive literary judgment.

Nowhere has this phenomenon been more pronounced than the obscenity trials surrounding *Naked Lunch* and the critical marginalization of Burroughs in their aftermath. Literary-legal theorist Frederick Whiting argues that despite the emancipatory narrative of *Naked Lunch*’s eventual acquittal, “Burroughs’s novel found legal and cultural vindication not because authorial freedom of expression... was sacrosanct, but because its advocates were able to assimilate it to a discourse of psychopathology that was crucial to the maintenance of the normative order” (Whiting 147). Elevating his highly publicized battle with addiction to an all-encompassing symbol for Burroughs and *Naked Lunch*, “attackers wished to dismiss his work as the vile outpourings of a drug addict,” while “admirers praised its importance on the grounds that Burroughs had given an accurate account of the addict’s life, and had brought the truth back from hell” (Skerl 7). As a result of the interpretive imperative set by the court, *Naked Lunch* has been presented exclusively as a

semi-autobiographical-drug-narrative, an interpretation of Burroughs' work that has persisted to varying degrees throughout his expansive career.

Discussing the state of contemporary Burroughs scholarship, Jennie Skerl identifies "the censorship of *Naked Lunch*, the legend surrounding his life and his personality, his involvement in popular culture, his early association with the Beats, his expatriation, and the fragmentation of his critical audience," as extra-literary factors "that have often prevented critics from looking at [Burroughs'] work itself" (Skerl 3). In light of such barriers, those interested in the artistic complexity and radical experimentation of Burroughs' text must first deconstruct the interpretive boundaries that have kept *Naked Lunch* at a distance from its readers since it was first put on trial in 1960.<sup>4</sup> To redress the injustices done to the influential legacy of William S. Burroughs and to the artistic freedom he personified, it is necessary to reject the very arguments used by his defenders to exonerate *Naked Lunch*. Imprisoning Burroughs and his work in the confines of authorial myth, the attempt to eliminate literary censorship through the extension of First Amendment protections to all literature counteractively established an even more insidious regime of self-censorship and literary control.

### **"I Know It When I See It..."**

A turning point in the genealogy of obscenity, *Attorney General v. A Book Named 'Naked Lunch'* marks the apex of the disciplinary model of censorship that governed U.S literary production for nearly 30 years. Understood in the Foucauldian sense, the gradual implementation of judicial discipline has fueled obscenity law reform since the landmark

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<sup>4</sup> *Big Table Inc. v. Carl A. Schroeder, United States Postmaster for Chicago Illinois*. 186 F. Supp 254. United States District Court N.D. Illinois. (1960).

exoneration of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1933<sup>5</sup>. Before the advent of discipline, however, obscenity law existed in large part as a mechanism of brute literary suppression.

Conceptualized as a sovereign-juridico model of censorship, in which the state's role is purely punitive, literary suppression finds its roots in the earliest of American obscenity laws. Enacted on March 3, 1873, the Comstock Laws<sup>6</sup> signaled the beginning of U.S. obscenity regulation. Crafted as an amendment to 1872 *Post Office Act*<sup>7</sup>, the Comstock Laws gave the Postal Service the power to regulate the material they distributed, namely material concerning contraception and abortion. The citation of England's *Regina v. Hicklin*<sup>8</sup> (1868) as precedent for the confirmation of the Comstock Laws' constitutionality marked the first nationwide obscenity standard. Centralizing the country's many local ordinances under one federal statute, *Rosen v. United States*<sup>9</sup> (1896) adopted *Hicklin's* stance that material with the ability "to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences<sup>10</sup>," was obscene and subject to enjoinder. This standard remained ostensibly intact until *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses* (1933). In his ruling Judge John Wolsey reminded the court, "in respect of the recurrent emergence of the theme of sex in the minds of [Joyce's] characters, it must be remembered that his locale was Celtic and his season Spring." (Pagnattaro 220). The exoneration of *Ulysses* set a significant precedent for the protection of certain material under the First Amendment based solely on its perceived artistic value. In doing so, the court made its first foray into literary criticism.

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<sup>5</sup> *United States v. One Book Called 'Ulysses'*. 5 F. Supp 182. District Court New York. (1933).

<sup>6</sup> *The Comstock Act*. 17 Stat. 598. (Enacted March 3, 1873).

<sup>7</sup> *The Post Office Act*. 17 Stat. 283. (Enacted June 8, 1872).

<sup>8</sup> *The Queen, on the Prosecution of Henry Scott, Appellant v. Benjamin Hicklin and Another, Justices of Wolverhampton, Respondents*. L.R. 3 Q.B 360. Court of the Queen's Bench. 1868.

<sup>9</sup> *Rosen v. United States*, 161 U.S. 29. Supreme Court of the United States. 1896.

<sup>10</sup> This provision is often referred to as 'the most vulnerable clause.'

Unconcerned with the discipline of cultural literacy, the Comstock Laws sought to remove objectionable material from the mail without regard for its artistic value or instructive potential. Acting in a strictly punitive manner, the wholesale suppression achieved by *Comstock* was later undermined by the Court's fear of appearing reactionary when deliberating on the relative obscenity of a critically lauded work. As Foucault notes, the implementation of discipline is often masked by the construction of an egalitarian juridical framework. Opening the door to literary discipline, Justice Wolsey's desire to protect 'great literature' like *Ulysses* from censorship represents an attempt by the state to not only regulate *what* material is read, but *why* that material is read. Borrowing architecture from Foucault, this jurisprudential shift marks the transition from the pre-modern dungeon to Benthaian panopticon. Or, as legal scholar Douglas Litowitz explains, "The sovereign-juridico model no longer fits our society because the disciplines have moved to the forefront: law is no longer merely the punishment of external behavior but now also consists of exposing and regulating the internal thoughts of the perpetrator" (Litowitz 79). Described as an organizational tool designed to constantly monitor, and thus subtly regulate a given population, Foucault's panopticon exerts discipline without force. By creating a protected and an unprotected class of literature, Justice Wolsey broke first ground on the eventual construction of a literary panopticon that would come to shape the reception of literature without ever lifting a disciplinary finger.

However, it was not until *Roth v. United States*<sup>11</sup> (1957) that the court fully acknowledged the power it held to influence the development of literary culture. Legal historian, Michael Goodman, claims that federal rejection of *Regina v. Hicklin* by *Roth* all but

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<sup>11</sup> *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476. Supreme Court of the United States. 1957.



eliminated the long standing 'most vulnerable' clause. In his majority opinion for *Butler v. Michigan's* (1957), the state level predecessor to *Roth*, Justice Frankfurter makes the insightful argument that "the incidence of this enactment [of *Regina v. Hicklin*] is to reduce the adult population of Michigan to reading only what is fit for children" (Coupe 122). As a result, *Roth's* rejection of the *Hicklin* test made it necessary to redraft the criteria used to define obscenity. Ruling, "The standard for judging obscenity, [...], is whether, to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interest," *Roth* opened the floodgates for a wave of new challenges to federal obscenity law. In the decade following *Roth's* landmark decision more than a dozen state and federal cases would come to radically alter the landscape of literary obscenity.

Despite upholding the interpretations of *Hicklin v Regina*, which exempted obscenity from protection under the First Amendment, *Roth v United States* did overturn *Hicklin's* criteria of implied readership; a decision which was championed as a needed liberalization of obscenity law. However, was this truly the case? While it is unquestionable that Justice Brennan's reformulation of obscenity standards in *Roth* did broaden the scope of First Amendment protections, it also drastically expanded the interpretive authority of the court. No longer reliant on vague approximations of the psyches of women and children to contextualize determinations of obscenity, the court now possessed the power to define the average reader. In conjunction with this ability, the court successfully installed a singular lens through which all literary interpretations were channeled and refracted. As the first in a series of major constitutional reviews of obscenity law that would eventually

culminate in *Miller v. California*<sup>12</sup> (1973), a case often referred to as the death of obscenity law, *Roth v. United States* marks the transition from a system of literary suppression to a system of literary discipline.

To better understand this distinction, it is first necessary to address the fundamental ends of obscenity law. If it is assumed that the primary goal of obscenity law is to protect the population from moral corruption by reducing the availability of obscene material, *Roth* marks a significant departure from such an objective. In the wake of the acquittal of Joyce's *Ulysses*, there emerged a backlash against obscenity regulations. Rejecting the draconian tendencies of its more puritanical applications, the modus operandi of obscenity regulation transitioned from suppression to disciplinary assimilation. Rather than the prohibition of objectionable literature, as represented by the Comstock Laws, obscenity courts instead opted to neutralize the objectionable through the discipline of context and interpretation.

The obscenity trial, as a discursive technology, raises the fundamental legal question, what speech does The First Amendment protect, and what speech does it not? As the *Roth* decision states:

3. Obscenity is not within the First Amendment protections of freedom of speech or press - either (1) under the First Amendment, as to the Federal Government, or (2) under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, as to the States.
  - (a) In the light of history, it is apparent that the unconditional phrasing of the First Amendment was not intended to protect every utterance.
  - (b) The protection given speech and press was fashioned to assure unfettered interchange of ideas for the bringing about of political and social changes desired by the people. (*Roth* 484).

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<sup>12</sup> *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15. Supreme Court of the United States. 1973.

Predicated on the desire to facilitate change, the First Amendment offers protection to any speech that federal courts deem socially important. However, does this protection actually encourage change? Addressing this question Barthes states,

“Encratic language (the language produced and spread under the protection of power) is statutorily a language of repetition; all official institutions of language are repeating machines [...] all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words: the stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology” (*Pleasure of the Text* 40).

In light of Barthes analysis, *Roth's* expansion of First Amendment protections did not galvanize change, but suppressed it. Existing outside of the protection of power, obscenity marks a radical threat to the reproduction of established order. In response to the ingrained repetition of encratic language, Barthes points to the confrontational forces of novelty and discontinuity. Frustrating the organizational discipline of *Roth's* obscenity standards, these forces create blind spots in the panoptical gaze of the censor. In the disorder of such blind spots texts, like *Naked Lunch*, are able to exploit the “spatial unities [of the panopticon] that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately.” (*Discipline and Punish* 201). Unable to recognize work that fails to adhere to a standardized definition of literature, the Court cannot extend First Amendment literary protection to texts it does not see as literature. Rejecting the “homogeneous effects of power,” novelty lacks the visibility of First Amendment protection and is therefore avoids transcription into the encratic language of panoptic discipline (*Discipline and Punish* 201). Fighting to bring censored literature back into the light of day, free speech advocates often overlook the fact that “full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which is ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.” (*Discipline and Punish* 200). Avoiding the same

snarcs set by the laws they enacted, obscenity courts project an air of transparency while operating predominately in the shadows.

For example, *Roth's* appeal to "redeeming social value" obscures the underlying value assumptions made by the court regarding the scope of literature and its proper place within society. The construction of a standard rubric of value for the measurement of a work's literariness served to restrict critical appraisal to a single, consistent yardstick. Rather than increasing the burden of proof necessary to demonstrate that literature was obscene, the *Roth* decision increased the burden of proof necessary to demonstrate that literature was, in fact, literature. In his analysis of the influence of *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses*, Loren Glass argues "the *Ulysses* case legitimated the concept of the 'modern classic' as a category of book that could be determined by experts," and in doing so, set "a legal precedent against suppressing a book for isolated passages [and] also affirmed the modernist theory of the aesthetic integrity of the text as the author's intended and inviolate creation" (Glass 180). In effect, the elevation of Joyce and *Ulysses* to the apotheosis of 'true literature' prompted subsequent obscenity cases to cite a work's similarity to *Ulysses* as an indication of serious intention or artistic merit. For instance, in asserting the artistic merit of *Naked Lunch*, Norman Mailer compares Burroughs to Joyce, arguing for their similarity, and even commenting that *Naked Lunch's* parodies "were more subtle than those of Joyce in *Ulysses*" (Goodman 198). Asserting that serious literature was solely the product of the serious intentions of a serious author, the influence of *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses* served to ground the epistemology of legal readings of literature in the presence of the author in the text. Consequently, anyone defending material accused of obscenity was

forced to reproduce an interpretation of the work that fit the narrow requirements of *Roth's* definition of "redeeming social importance."

Despite the legal significance of these debates, very few of the cases argued between 1963 and 1973 explicitly pertained to literature, focusing instead on logistical issues regarding the advertisement and distribution of questionable material.<sup>13</sup> *Attorney General v. A Book Named 'Naked Lunch'*<sup>14</sup> (1963) stands as a unique example in that "the recognition of *Naked Lunch* as a work of art by the literary community set it apart from other publications involved in the Supreme Court decisions" (Goodman 4). As such, the case provides valuable insight into the underlying critical assumptions held by the judiciary in regards to literature's place within a disciplinary apparatus. A Disciplinary Society, according to Foucault, organizes vast spaces into a series of closed environments that are then subject to specific rules and regulations. In this sense, the obscenity trial functions as branch of the discipline society.

### **"The Old Pin and Dropper Routine"**

"A group of P.Rs- Partially reconditioned- have surrounded some homosexual tourists with horrible knowing smiles showing the Nordic skull beneath in double exposure.

'What do you want?' snaps one of the queens.

'We want to *understand* you.'

(*Naked Lunch* 42).

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<sup>13</sup> "During the past term of the Supreme Court, three cases were decided in an attempt to clarify the doubtful aspects of the *Roth* test concerning the nature of 'obscenity'. *Ginzburg v. United States* is significant as the court's initial treatment of the advertising portion of the federal statute making certain obscene materials non-mailable while adding a new 'pandering' test to the *Roth* criteria. *Mishkin v. New York* and *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure v. Massachusetts*, respectively, develop the 'average person' and 'redeeming social value' elements of the *Roth* approach" (Coupe 121).

<sup>14</sup> *Attorney General v. A Book Named 'Naked Lunch.'* 351 Mass. 298. Supreme Court of the State of Massachusetts. (1966.)

Despite the explicit sense of menace that Burroughs attributes to the act of understanding, critics and legal professionals have persistently turned to textual interpretation as a means of attempting to understand *Naked Lunch*. As Burroughs seems to suggest, interpretation is an inherently violent act. Denoting two distinctly different actions, the verb, “to interpret,” requires either the translation of the familiar into the foreign, or the translation of the foreign into the familiar. Literary interpretation rejects this dichotomy, however, opting instead to exclusively reduce a work’s plurality down to a single point of origin, easily consumed and assimilated into a familiar structure of critical understanding. Without this point of origin to ground a critical apparatus, literary judgments lack authority. Holding equally true in the legal sense, a suspect on trial lacking a definitive point of origin, or alibi, also lacks credibility. Shining a penetrating spotlight into the fictive landscape, the panoptical discipline of obscenity law functions to identify these points of origin for the purposes of containment and control. Searching for this point of origin, the Court settled upon Burroughs’ struggles with addiction as the structural center of *Naked Lunch*’s critical/legal identity.

In the dedication of *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg first references what would later become *Naked Lunch*, mentioning “an endless novel which will drive everybody mad.” As Ginsberg warns, the many genetic iterations of *Naked Lunch* that pre-date its 1962 publication establish a deferred presence that *endlessly* delays the interpretive mastery by driving those in search of a definitive origin or explanation *mad*. Of these various publications, the introductory “Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness” offers the most fascinating and yet ultimately frustrating interpretive invitation. Just as Jacques Derrida’s notion of *différance* posits the endless difference and deferral of the signified, the paratextual

elements of *Naked Lunch* refuse to give up their secret, endlessly alluding to an alibi that is never truly given, or given truly. As a result, the legal imperative to reveal one's origin is met with necessary but never sufficient conditions. Harris cautions, "Reconstructing the real scene of *Naked Lunch*'s origins brings us back to the account given by Burroughs in 'The Deposition.' In its legal sense, this tells no lies but it's nevertheless wholly misleading" (*Beginnings* 21).

Mirroring the tension between absence and presence hinted at in its title, Burroughs' introductory essay is comprised of two distinct parts, "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness<sup>15</sup>" and "Postscript...wouldn't you?". While dissimilar and often contradictory, these two sections are both ostensibly true yet riddled with factual errors. Juxtaposing the clinical, consistent, and uncharacteristically lucid prose of the "Deposition" against the increasingly unhinged and fragmented text of the "Postscript," Burroughs offers up the compelling origin story of a redeemed-addict-made-good, only to immediately call the validity of his own account into question. Adopting a position exterior to the authoritative tone of the "Deposition," the "Postscript" makes reference to the "World Health Problem I was talking about back in The Article," as well as "some bush league short con artist who is known to have invented The Bill," challenging the authenticity of

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<sup>15</sup> The terms deposition and testimony, while both primarily associated with the logistics of legal procedure, are, in fact, divergent means of discourse. Legal testimony, defined non-rigorously, generally indicates statements addressed to a courtroom made under a binding oath of truthfulness. Often presented to the court via structured dialogue between a lawyer and a witness, testimony is defined by the physical presence of both interlocutors. Depositions, however, are presented to the court as a form of written testimony in which an absent witness is represented by a written statement. In this very literal sense, depositions are imbued with a deferred presence. The separation of deposition from testimony by a mere colon, if read in a syntactically descriptive manner, misleadingly suggests that the truthful presence of a testimony can be located within the larger parameters of the deposition.

Burroughs as the essay's expressed narrator (*Naked Lunch* 13). In doing so, the "Deposition" further perpetuates the deferred presence of the text's most fundamental point of origin, its author. Signed "William S. Burroughs," the confessional rhetoric of the "Deposition" implies privileged access to the author through the text (*Naked Lunch* 14). Never equivocally acknowledging that "The Bill" is, or is not, the construction of a shadowy conman who remains secretly hidden behind the text's implied origin, the "Postscript" adds an additional layer of fascination by deferring the authenticity of testimony with an alibi that is always beyond or external to the text. Akin to pleading the fifth, this coy renunciation of textual ownership parodies "the entire genre of genetic anecdote," by "dismiss[ing] the definitive account as a myth like any other" (Harris "Beginnings" 22). While many Burroughs scholars read this parody as an abstract criticism of objective knowledge, few question their own commitment to such an interpretation. To dismiss all definitive accounts as myth is itself an act of closure antithetical to the proposition in question. Rather than falling back on the alibi of strict parody, an inside joke in which all interpretation is subjective and lacks established meaning, Burroughs defers interpretive mastery through a relentless insistence on the literal and a seductive if not irresistible invitation to interpret.

Burroughs' siren song is set in motion immediately with the claim that, "I awoke from The Sickness at the age of forty-five, calm and sane, and in reasonably good health except for a weakened liver and the look of borrowed flesh common to all who survive The Sickness" (*Naked Lunch* 7). The text immediately establishes the speaker as posterior to, and as a result, in control of, the narrative that follows. The passage's past tense, first person narration evokes the narrative authority of a memoir, diary entry, or



autobiography. Such narrative forms carry with them the implicit expectation of truth and transparency.<sup>16</sup> The speaker's temporal distance from the events they relay imbues them with a sense of omnipotence that comes from the direct access to their own past thoughts and motivations. Having already read the story that they are re-telling, the first person narrator holds a position of interpretive power, their access to the truth is greater than that of the reader, and as a result, their ability to ascribe meaning and significance is privileged. This authorial dominance over the text is only heightened by the series of binaries that establish the narrative's context. Written during "The Sickness" from which the narrator has been woken, the body text of *Naked Lunch* is juxtaposed against the book's introduction, written external to the sickness. This juxtaposition functions on a variety of levels to establish the metaphoric dominance of the introduction over the rest of the text.

While never explicitly addressed, a process of oppositional definition characterizes the body text by what it is not. If the introduction is written in a state of wakefulness, the body's origin is one of sleep and unconsciousness. If the introduction is the product of a narrator who is "calm, sane, and in reasonably good health," the body is the result of sickness, frenzy, and insanity. The construction of this dualism suggests the comforting dominance of the present over the past, the mind over the body, and the author over his text.

The absence/presence of the "Deposition" in *Naked Lunch's* two most prominent legal challenges provides an account of the impact the section had upon the book's legal/literary interpretation. A cursory analysis of judicial outcomes demonstrates the legal

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<sup>16</sup> Specializing in the autobiographical, genetic theorist Philippe Lejeune remarks, "The object of an autobiographical text is the truth of the past, and its contract implies both the possibility and the legitimacy of verification" (Lejeune 196). Burroughs willfully exploits this contract.

significance of the section. In the 1960 case against *Big Table*, *Naked Lunch* lacked the “Deposition,” and was found obscene, but in 1966’s Boston trial *Naked Lunch* included the “Deposition” and was cleared of obscenity charges much more easily. This raises the question, what is it about the “Deposition” that is so legally persuasive? The same question should also be directed towards *Naked Lunch*’s literary audience. A majority of critics who have engaged *Naked Lunch* have done so *through* the “Deposition,” that is they have relied on the symbols and analogies Burroughs foregrounds in his essay as a key to unlocking the text’s hidden or underlying message.

Or perhaps, rather than a key, many critics have used the “Deposition” as a map to navigate the radical terrain of Burroughs’ text. Or perhaps, better still, the “Deposition” has functioned as a legend for the map that is the text of *Naked Lunch*. This tertiary depiction of critical engagement with the “Deposition” draws on Alfred Korzybski’s remark that, “the map is not the territory”(Korzybski 1931). A student of Korzybski, Burroughs shared a similar mistrust of the degree to which language governed human interaction. The “Deposition” brims with master-symbols like “The Sickness,” “The Junk Virus,” “The pyramid of junk,” and “The Algebra of Need,” which function as cardinal directions for the bulk of Burroughs scholarship, organizing a disparate field of criticism around central signposts (*Naked Lunch* 7-8). It is even possible to argue that these signposts constitute a symbol-system of their own, shorthand for Burroughs scholars to more efficiently discuss an otherwise unwieldy text without stable plots, characters, or settings to reference and ground discussion.

Of these interpretive signposts, the most dominant still remains the drug narrative relayed by Burroughs in the opening pages of the “Deposition.” As indicated previously, the

inclusion of the “Deposition” to the text of *Naked Lunch* during the interim between the Big Table trials and the Boston trials can be viewed as correlative to the outcome of judgments regarding the book’s obscenity. While the absence/presence of Burroughs’ widely discussed paratext has been analyzed in a variety of legal contexts, the absence/presence of narcotics-use that drives the introduction is often over-looked. As Davis Schneiderman notes, “If Lee is on drugs, quitting drugs, hallucinating through drugs, then our world remains protected outside this altered state,” and, as a result, is freed from the responsibility of having to answer to the criticism that this exterior/altered state garners (Schneiderman 192). If an aberration can be traced back to an external origin, the cause of that problematic difference is shifted and postponed.

This trend becomes glaringly obvious in both the prosecution’s and the defense’s attempts to reconcile the text of *Naked Lunch* with the discursive parameters of the legal system. In an attempt to placate the interpretive expectations of obscenity regulations, sociologist Paul Hollander of Harvard University was called upon to testify to the value of *Naked Lunch* to his profession and to society at large. Synthesizing Hollander’s response, Michael Goodman writes, “the specific sociological significance of the book lay in its concern with drug addiction,” and that because *Naked Lunch*’s depiction of addiction “corresponded to the scientific data available on the subject,” the book “made concrete and believable some of the abstract scientific notions of the field” (Goodman 185). Hollander’s testimony reduces the entirety *Naked Lunch* down to the “Deposition”’s elemental discussion of drug addiction, only to have the discussion itself similarly reduced to a single data point and subsumed into the larger medical discussion of addiction.

Trading the relationship of differences between *Naked Lunch*’s heterogeneous textual

symptoms for a relationship of similarity to established scientific notions, Hollander's medical discourse assimilates textual material that is 'useful' while discarding that which does not fit. This refusal, an overwhelming majority of the text, frustrates what Schneiderman identifies as "the readerly hope" that a text will facilitate "the ultimate possibility of meaning-making as an elusive reward for intrepid exploration" and that as a result many critics engage in "a key analytical flaw: reading what makes 'sense' in *Naked Lunch* while dismissing the 'excess' text as hallucinations produced through William Lee's drug cure" (Schneiderman 190). While Schneiderman's identification of a critical drive towards overzealous textual grooming appears well founded, the motivations he ascribes to the act are suspect. Rather than an active effort to draw an elusive meaning out of *Naked Lunch*, the insistence on the centrality of "Deposition"'s drug narrative suggests a more defensive reading posture.

### **"Ordinary Men and Women"**

In "Afterthoughts on a Deposition," a 1991 paratextual addition to *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs sustains the text's genetic difference by simultaneously revealing and concealing the book's ambiguous origins. Adding yet another alibi to the book's numerous, and often contradictory, paratextual origin stories, "Afterthoughts" asserts that the "junk problem" outlined in the "Deposition," "began with the *Harrison Narcotics Act* of 1914" (*Naked Lunch* 15). In his essay, "Monstrosity on Trial," Fredrick Whiting traces the medical/legal push to develop the acceptance of 'the addict' as an established institutional identity whose origins, he argues, are found in the *Harrison Narcotics Act*. *The Harrison Act's* decision to place the distribution of opiates under the control of the medical

establishment also served to place users of opiates under the same degree of institutional regulation. Whiting points to this moment as the impetus for the societal shift from a person who is physically dependent upon the continued use of opiates towards the construction of “the addict” as a firmly defined identity. Echoing the taxonomic rationale of Hollander’s testimony, in which a clinical rubric of discrete medical phenomena was superimposed onto the text of *Naked Lunch*, Whiting analyses the 1940 article, “The Drug Addict: Patient or Criminal” by A.R Lindesmith, in order to demonstrate the manner in which the accumulation of scientific knowledge functions as a powerful mechanism in the formation of restrictive, institutional identities:

“Citing and synthesizing work spanning the previous two decades, Lindesmith observed that the predominant medical theory of the day placed the majority of addicts in classificatory categories either derivative of or closely correlated with psychopathy. Statistical representations of the phenomenon of addiction indicated that “normal” addicted individuals represented only 13 or 14 percent of the overall population of addicts, while the rest were divided into groups such as “inadequate personalities,” “criminalism,” and “homosexuality,” all of which were explained by the underlying condition of psychopathy.” (Whiting 151).

Engaged in a deferred search for an alibi, Lindesmith’s observations locate the origin of difference at the site of psychopathy. Generally signifying a deviation from the psychology of ‘normal’ individuals, psychopathy organizes a multiplicity of individual/societal deviations around one central point of cause. The legal/medical construction of the addict appeals to “individual pathology rather than admitting social or systemic causes,” and as a result, “the deviance exhibited by addicts, as a species in the genus psychopath, was a matter of identity rather than practice” (Whiting 152). Imitating the textual grooming performed on *Naked Lunch* by the Massachusetts State Supreme Court, as well as by many Burroughs scholars, Lindesmith’s psychopathy forges a

relationship of similarity at the expense of difference. The adoption of any dominant interpretive strategy, like *Naked Lunch's* drug narrative or Lindesmith's psychopathy, provides justification for the marginalization of text and human alike. That which does not fit the established criteria is not necessary, or as Burroughs fraudulently paraphrases Wittgenstein's *Tractacus Logico-Philosophicus*, "If a proposition is NOT NECESSARY it is MEANINGLESS and approaching MEANING ZERO" (*Naked Lunch* 13). As such, this process of marginalization becomes paramount when reexamining Whiting's assessment of the critical motivations that have propped up the "Deposition"'s flimsy drug narrative for so long. Rather than an act of discovery, as Whiting suggests, in which unfit material is pushed to the side in search of a truth buried beneath it, interpretive marginalization functions as an act of definition. By pushing excess material to the side, that which is inassimilable articulates the contours of the normative order that exists within/ as a result of its boundaries. Without these firm borders the binary logic that supports *Naked Lunch's* drug narrative as either true/untrue and the addict as either sane/insane begins to break down, dismantling the relationships of dominance it supports. In this sense, the marginalization of institutionally assigned identity operates defensively, fortifying the walls that protect and perpetuate the dominance of a normative order.

With this in mind, the critical and legal persistence of the "Deposition"'s drug narrative is transformed from naive preoccupation with the "pin and dropper routine"<sup>17</sup> into a more calculated attempt to define and enclose the text, neutralizing its radically deconstructive potential (*Naked Lunch* 23). A brief examination of the court records from

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<sup>17</sup> The pin and dropper are tools used to inject heroin in the absence of a syringe. When preformed as a "routine" they function as metonymic symbols of the literary tendency to over romanticize abstract, often gruesome, characterizations of addicts while neglecting the literal, more mundane, and ultimately humanizing details of addiction.

*Naked Lunch's* two most prominent legal challenges quickly reveals the degree to which Burroughs' identity as an addict shaped the book's reception and interpretation. One particular exchange between the defense and prosecution of *Naked Lunch's* initial Big Table case clearly testifies to the legal dominance of abstract identity over literal action, or rather the substitution of agency for image. When asked if it were necessary to establish before the court that William S. Burroughs was an addict, testifying criminologist Hans W. Mattick was prompted to respond that "if [Burroughs] has never used drugs, [*Naked Lunch*] is a very remarkable, sympathetic and vicarious experience which [Burroughs] is delineating and is a true image as far as I know" (Goodman 60-61). Thus, whether or not Burroughs had ever actually consumed a single gram of heroin his name and his writing were synonymous with and justified by the signifier, addict. Similarly, Burroughs' essentialized identity as an addict was appealed to frequently over the course of both trials to justify and neatly explain *Naked Lunch's* successes, failures, and numerous unaccountable inconsistencies.

Institutional identities like the addict not only serve to smother difference, but also to reinforce ingrained power asymmetries. Whiting argues that, "Because ['the addict'] fit the form of deviance into a larger taxonomy of illness and a corresponding causal structure, [...] even in its departure from the orderly operation of nature; ['the addict'] became explicable and to that extent namable" (Whiting 152). Grounded in the medicalized phenomenon of psychopathy, however, the addict remained nameable only to a certain extent. Unable to trace psychopathy back to a root cause that might allow for its assimilation into the larger medical discourse, the "inability to provide a complete causal account of the addict left him at least partly inexplicable, a disruption of the scientifically

knowable universe" (Whiting 152). As a result, the legal anxiety over Burroughs' status as an addict can be seen as analogous to the anxiety felt towards *Naked Lunch's* status as literature. A book without an origin is a book without explanation, and without a sufficient explanation a book cannot be assimilated into institutionalized interpretational structures.

This assignment of authorial identity intended to ground the disciplinary apparatus of the obscenity trial produces a single point of literary origin. However, as Gilles Deleuze points out, origins do not exist in any true or positive sense. Part of a larger dualism, an origin lacks meaning without a destination. Describing a relationship of spatial/temporal unity between two pre-existing points, an otherwise antonymous event is press ganged into service when assigned a relationship of casual similarity in the form of origin/destination. Burroughs' history of drug abuse and *Naked Lunch's* obscene potential would be inconsequential without a destination, or an audience. Concluding, "disciplinary societies have two poles: the signature that designates the individual, and the number or administrative numeration that indicates his or her position within a mass," Deleuze acknowledges the often overlooked counterpart to the literary notion of the implied-author, the implied-reader (*Societies of Control* 5). Grossly simplified, the act of communication consists of the transmission of content from point A to point B. In turn, the length and direction of this trajectory constitute the parameters of interpretation. Therefore, control over either A or B, author or audience, grants substantial influence over the perception of a work. However, to control both A and B is not to influence the trajectory of a work, but to recreate it entirely.<sup>18</sup> In this light, the judiciary's concern with who is most

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<sup>18</sup> Jorge Bores undertakes a similar project in his famous short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." While the original text of *Don Quixote* remains unchanged, the



likely to access obscene material appears less like an enlightened attempt to prevent unnecessary censorship, and more like a strategic attempt to control the boundaries of interpretation. While a handful of scholars have analyzed how Burroughs' status as an addict has influenced the reception of *Naked Lunch*, the (re)creation of *Naked Lunch* as a book written by a recovering addict and read by "the average person applying contemporary community standards," remains critically unexamined.

Before considering the influence of *Roth's* "average reader" on the trajectory of *Naked Lunch's* interpretation, it is useful to revisit the initial reasons the ruling was enacted, namely the court's rejection of *Hicklin's* most vulnerable clause. As Goodman notes, "The *Roth* decision in 1957 all but castrated the most vulnerable notion [established by *Regina v Hicklin*] with the assertion that its ultimate effect would reduce all reading material to the level of a child" (Goodman 46). Backed by a number of lower court decisions, the logic of this rationale reveals an important assumption made by the legal system regarding the effects of establishing an intended reader for any given work. If the designation of a child as the intended reader of a work were understood to cause that work to be lowered to the level of a child, it would follow then, that appointing an average reader would impose similar limitations. This logic suggests that an average intended-reader will yield an average and intended reading. However, who is the 'average reader', or more precisely, who or what is average?

The term "Average," when cited by *Roth*, seems to suggest a colloquialism intended to indicate some measure of central tendency for a given population. In these terms, there exist three general measurements of centrality, mean, median and mode. Rather than

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addition of a new author and a new critical audience radically alters how the text is understood, constituting an entirely new narrative.

embarking on a tedious mathematical digression in hope of answering this question, the political parties of *Naked Lunch* provide a helpful point of comparison. Comprised by two warring factions, the political landscape of Interzone is dominated by the Divisionists and the Liquifactionalists. The Divisionists “cut off tiny bits of their flesh and grow exact replicas of themselves in embryo jelly,” reproducing in the hope that “there will be one replica of one sex on the planet: that is one person in the world with millions of separate bodies” (*Naked Lunch* 133). In this sense, the Divisionists operate within a nominal data set and advocate a modal average.<sup>19</sup> The Liquifactionalists, on the other hand, favor “the eventual merging of everyone into One Man by a process of protoplasmic absorption” (*Naked Lunch* 120). In this sense, the Liquifactionalists operate within an ordinal data set and advocate a median average.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of this analysis, however, is not, as originally suggested, to determine which party or statistical tool most closely resembles *Roth’s* ‘average reader’, but to demonstrate that “the parties are not in practice separate but blend in all combinations,” existing as different sides of the same reductive coin (*Naked Lunch* 135). The determination of ‘the average’ is not a neutral description of demographic phenomena, or an extension of populist sentiment, but a strategic endpoint towards which possibilities of difference are funneled and subsumed in the reproduction of similarity. When

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<sup>19</sup> Nominal data, used in qualitative analysis, differentiates objects based on their relative adherence to established taxonomies of classification. Therefore, mode indicates what is most common within any given structure. As the Divisionists divide, their modal tendency strengthens.

<sup>20</sup> Ordinal data cannot be measured absolutely, and thus orders values in accordance to their relative difference. The median functions to indicate the middle of a set. As the Liquifactionalists converge their median tendency strengthens.

attempting to clarify the identity of average reader of *Naked Lunch*<sup>21</sup>, Paul Carroll described someone “who reads serious works of literature with the intention of not merely entertainment, but of finding deeper insights into his own condition and the life around him... to learn some of the truths of life from that literature,” providing a highly detailed account of an otherwise general distinction (Goodman 46).<sup>22</sup> While any of these descriptions may be accurate themselves, it is not the veracity of the court’s claims that is problematic, but rather their linguistic concealment. If *Roth’s* justification for overturning *Hicklin’s* definition of the intended-readers is to be accepted, then the court’s use of metaphorical abstraction to obscure their own criteria stands as a subtle, yet powerful example of the controlled reproduction of order.

Identifying this silent pull towards homogeneity as an inherent characteristic of language itself, Burroughs embraces the literalness of metonymy as a rhetorical weapon against the abstraction of metaphor. Expressed more sharply, metaphor spawns “Abstract thought, bare as algebra, narrow down to a black turd or a pair of aging cajones,” in this case belonging to Burroughs (*Naked Lunch* 177). Demonstrated by the critical/legal insistence on “The Deposition”’s autobiographical drug narrative as an over-arching metaphor for *Naked Lunch* as a whole, Burroughs scholar Robin Lydenberg notes “the instinct of the humanist critic confronted with Burroughs’ writing is to dress it up as allegory and moral satire, to distance and defuse the novel by making it a mediating or disposable code serving a more abstract and therefore less threatening message” (*Word*

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<sup>21</sup> Specifically, Paul Carroll is referring to readership of the 1959 publication of large excerpts of *Naked Lunch* in the first issue of the literary magazine, *Big Table*.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, it was argued that *Naked Lunch’s* use of profanity did not exceed contemporary community standards due to the prevalence of ‘four-letter’ words in other literary works, namely *Ulysses*.

*Cultures* 9). Initiating a relationship of similarity between two otherwise independently signified objects, metaphor unifies literal difference under a single, dominant interpretation. The “Deposition”’s metaphorical construction of ‘the addict’ as a symbol of the singular relationship between Burroughs and drug addiction employs what Korzybski terms ‘the is of identity.’ Attacking this phenomenon, Burroughs remarks,

“You are an animal. You are a body. Now whatever you may be you are not an ‘animal,’ you are not a ‘body,’ because these are verbal labels. The IS of identity always carries the implication of that and nothing else, and it also carries the assignment of permanent condition. [...] I cannot be and am not the verbal label ‘myself.’ The word BE in English contains, as a virus contains, its pre-coded message of damage, the categorical imperative of permanent condition. To be a body, to be nothing else, to stay a body. To be an animal, to be nothing else, to stay an animal. (*The Job* 200).

Staging metaphor as a violent act of naming, Burroughs turns to metonymy not as an antidote, but as a “naked version of metaphor” which “allows him to lay bare the repressive abuses of word and image which metaphor works to disguise” (*Word Cultures* 30). Lydenberg points to the parable of *Naked Lunch*’s “Talking Asshole” as evidence of Burroughs’ metonymic unveiling. Depicting a ventriloquist act in which a carnival worker teaches his asshole to talk, the passage demonstrates how “the metaphorical ‘man is an ass’ becomes the metonymic ‘man is an asshole.’ Man is not tentatively ‘like’ an ass, but unavoidably attached to his own anus” (*Word Cultures* 38). This knowledge deconstructs the mind/body dualism that constitutes selfhood. No longer required for reproduction of the linguistic self, the mouth becomes unnecessary and is ultimately absorbed back into the body repurposed to more valuable ends. Denied a voice, the marginalization of the carnival worker’s mouth parallels the legal/critical marginalization of alternative interpretations of *Naked Lunch*. As the asshole says to the mouth, “It’s you who will shut up in the end. Not me. Because we don’t need you around here any more. I can talk and eat and shit” (*Naked*

*Lunch* 110). Like the asshole, the “Deposition”’s autobiographical drug narrative dominates the body of the text by eliminating the need for alternative interpretations. The drug narrative’s ability to conveniently encompass and explain the entirety of *Naked Lunch* with a single metaphor makes additional interpretations superfluous. Concealed behind the legal signifiers ‘social importance’ and ‘literary value,’ Roth’s criteria covertly “equates interpretation with metaphorical decoding and with the ethical pursuit of truth” (*Word Cultures* 10). In doing so, *Roth* creates a legal metaphor that mandates metaphorical reading, marginalizing divergent approaches as unserious, unethical, and ultimately obscene. Through a program of radical self-contradiction Burroughs challenges the binary structures that support the dominance of *Roth’s* legal metaphors: interpretation IS metaphorical, literature IS interpretable, and obscenity IS not literature. If interpretation is understood in terms of the assignment of identity to a text, or the naming of a text, the refusal of a static identity precludes a text’s capacity for unified interpretation.

### **“Immaculate Birth Control”**

Intended to isolate an individual-part so that it might stand in for the whole of a subject’s identity, metaphor, like the panopticon, depends the rigid delineation of boundaries to maintain proper functioning. Kept separate from one another, individuals existing within a disciplinary apparatus are “confined to a cell from which [they are] seen from the front by a supervisor; but the side walls protect [them] from coming into contact with [their] companions” (*Discipline and Punish* 200). Arranged hierarchically, the conceptual organization of metaphorical decoding resembles the vertical configuration of the Panopticon’s cellular structure. Obstructing the horizontal view of its inmates, the

Panopticon's sturdy walls "imply a lateral invisibility. And this invisibility is a guarantee of order" (*Discipline and Punish* 201). Relying exclusively on this lack of visibility to maintain order, "[Jeremy] Bentham was surprised that panoptic institutions could be so light: there were no more bars, no more chains, no more heavy locks; all that was needed was that the separations should be clear and the openings well arranged" (*Discipline and Punish* 202). Rejecting the verticality of metaphor for the more horizontal nature of metonymy, *Naked Lunch* orchestrates a daring prison break by leveling the walls temporal/special cohesion that have traditionally constrained literary production. Instead instituting a rhizomatic structure of mosaic juxtapositions, *Naked Lunch* throws a wrench into the Panopticon's "marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces the homogeneous effects of power" (*Discipline and Punish* 201). Terminating the reproduction of vertical order, *Naked Lunch's* fictive landscape gives birth to the monstrous potential for new, heterogeneous forms of life and literature.

A Keystone in the construction of the metaphorical walls of identity, binary logic is dependent on institutional discipline to inscribe and reinforce its constitutional boundaries. As such, the clinical marginalization of addiction as a symptom of psychopathy reinforces the shape of sanity by separating similarity from difference, and by protecting the coherence of the self from the disorder of the other. However, it is precisely this insistence on the firm delineation of the exterior from the interior that the figure of 'the addict' frustrates. The ability of a hypodermic syringe to puncture the skin, breaching the internal/external bodily barrier, and to convert the material substance of heroin into the immaterial sensation of a fix destabilizes the reassuring dichotomies of mind/body, self/other. Without the presence of a discernible cause or origin to differentiate 'the addict'

from 'the normal citizen' the walls of identity are proven more permeable than previously thought. Thus, the drive to regulate addiction can be seen as reflective of larger anxieties regarding the separation between the public and private spheres.

To better understand the relationship between *Naked Lunch's* alleged obscenity and the intersection of public and private life, it is necessary to once again revisit the foundations of obscenity law in the United States. As part of a larger discussion, that has so far been fraught with the repeated deference of origins, Molly McGarry's historical analysis of the Comstock Laws provides another, possibly misleading, starting point. As the first national obscenity statute, the passage of the Comstock Laws in 1873 gave the federal government the power to regulate the content of material circulated through the U.S mail, while also marking a "move from circumscribing sexual acts to banning sexually explicit texts and images as means to control behavior" (McGarry 19). McGarry argues that the Comstock Laws sought control over the Postal Service not out of political expediency, but rather out of a deep seeded concern with the function of the mail itself.

When considering this concern, it is important to take into account the rapid expansion of new postal routes into previously isolated communities, as well as the expansion of literacy amongst women and children. Merging these disparate anxieties, McGarry notes that, "Comstock was convinced that the mail was a unique conduit between public and private" (McGarry 21). In other words, the installation of the mail slot in the American home signaled a leak in the hermetic seal of the private sphere. Once separate and safe from chaotic forces of the outside world, the privacy of the home could now be invaded by anyone for the price of a stamp.

When read as a text, the solidly defined boundaries of the home facilitate, if not require, the marginalization of alternative interpretations of private sphere. In this particular instance, the dominant interpretation of the home can be understood to adhere to a traditionally patriarchic rubric of value, in which the primary objective of the home is decidedly reproductive. In this sense, the home and the family function as fundamental building blocks in the reproduction of the larger normative order of society. In his discussion of ideology, Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, argues that, ‘in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce. It must therefore reproduce: 1. The productive forces [and] 2. The existing relations of production’ (Althusser 2). As such, to continue creating these building blocks, the home must also reproduce in a physical sense. It is no wonder then, that the Comstock Laws “expanded the category of obscenity to encompass all printed material, and, for the first time in history, criminalized the circulation of information and advertisements about contraception and abortion” (McGarry 9). As an alternative to the strictly reproductive mode of sex that allowed the home to replicate itself, information on contraception and abortion posed a threat to continuation of normative order. Similarly, any printed material that aroused desire outside the realm of reproductive sexuality could not be assimilated into the dominant interpretation of ‘the home’ and, as such, was expelled from the private sphere and deemed obscene.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Aware of the mail’s role in the reformation the public/private borders that constituted shape of ‘the home,’ and society at large, Comstock understood that “the mail was at once a national entity and a system allowing for the movement of goods and information across state lines,” and that, as such, “it represented an ideal target for reformers interested in constructing a unified national culture in the decade following the Civil War” (McGarry 21). Through the control of what was not acceptable, social reformers, like Comstock, subtly shaped what was acceptable, only to use the standard they had set to justify their initial



Despite the accusations made by prosecutors regarding the prurience of *Naked Lunch*, a brief comparison of the Comstock Laws to the *Roth* Test suggests not that *Naked Lunch* was overly concerned with sex, but rather, that it was concerned with the wrong type of sex. The *Roth* judgment states:

“4. (c) The standard for judging obscenity, adequate to withstand the charge of constitutional infirmity, is whether, to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interest. “

The establishment of prurient interest as a primary marker of obscenity initially appears to contradict the reproductive drive that I have argued shaped the Comstock Laws. However, loosely defined as an excessive interest in sex, the prurient appeal of the *Roth* Test does not refer to excess as an overabundance, but rather to excess as exceedance. Canguilhem’s cryptic aphorism, “One could say that a rock is enormous, but not that a mountain is monstrous,” provides a useful model for understanding this ambiguous rhetoric’s relationship to obscenity (Canguilhem 135). To do so, it is first necessary to argue that the Comstock Laws were not directly concerned with sexual desire, but rather with its application, for without an abundance of sexual drive the reproductive duties of the home could not be fulfilled and order could not be sustained. In differentiating the enormous from the monstrous Canguilhem explains, “The enormous escapes a norm that

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determination of obscenity. Returning to the figure of ‘the addict’, challenges to the established boundaries of order generate anxiety because they loosen the bolts that anchor personal identity, however these moments of destabilization are also ripe for control. When boundaries become blurry they can easily be reshaped to reinforce and reproduce normative orders. This is what the Boston trial did to *Naked Lunch*, the medical establishment did to the addict, and Comstock did to the mail. These systems, dependent on the substitution of difference for similarity, pick up momentum as they are reproduced. As more and more difference is assimilated into rubrics of similarity the evidence of the naturalness or truth of those rubrics is corroborated in an exponential feedback loop.

is only metric,” while “the existence of monsters calls into question the capacity of life to tech us order” (Canguilhem 134-135). Accordingly, *Roth’s* obscenity standard does not indicate the measure of a work’s ‘prurient appeal,’ but rather if the ‘prurient appeal’ of a work can be measured. Measurable in its consistency, the reproductive drive privileged by the Comstock Laws may be prurient, but is not obscene. However, without the consistency of order, measurement is impossible, and if a work cannot be measured it is monstrous, or rather it is obscene.

In this sense, consistency and obscenity are in conflict. The reproductive drive that informs the Comstock Laws is an imperative towards similarity; towards the replication of the home unit and the vertical hierarchy that it supports. Therefore, material that resists reproduction also resists similarity, and, as a result, is obscene. Until this point, the term “reproduction” has been used almost exclusively in reference to biological replication. This usage is limited, however. Linking sexual reproduction to textual reproduction, Barthes offers a useful analogy that may refine the term’s relationship to the larger argument. Drawing a rhetorical connection between sexual reproduction and the readerly text, Barthes states:

“The alibi of organic reproduction which supports the ‘readerly’ work culminates in the image of the text as a pregnant female body waiting to be ‘delivered’; “ [Any] classic (readerly) text is implicitly an art of Replete Literature: literature that is replete: like a cupboard where meanings are shelved, stacked, safeguarded (in this text nothing is ever lost: meaning recuperates everything); like a pregnant female, replete with signifieds which criticism will not fail to deliver” (*S/Z* 200-201).

While Barthes uses biology to figuratively indicate how the recuperation of meaning from a readerly text is dependent on its consistency, Burroughs offers a more literal account. Attacking physical reproduction through textual means, Burroughs issues a “bull

on immaculate birth control,” and rejects the ordered similarity of the readerly text and the home (*Naked Lunch* 178). Noted Burroughs scholar, Robin Lydenberg, reads Burroughs’ stance as one in which procreation “moves towards a sterile repetition which increasingly resists evolution and change” (*Word Cultures* 156). This aversion to reproduction is often foregrounded by other critics who have accused Burroughs of being anti-humanist, or more broadly, in opposition to life itself, a sentiment that was carried into the courtroom as further evidence of *Naked Lunch*’s obscenity. Individual passages, such as the following section from *Naked Lunch*’s “Benway” chapter, often appear to corroborate these interpretations.

“Male and female castrated he them. Who can’t distinguish between the sexes? I’ll cut your throat you white motherfucker. Come out in the open like my grandchild and meet thy unborn mother in dubious battle. Confusion hath fuck his masterpiece. I have cut the janitor’s throat quite by mistake of identity, he being such a horrible fuck like the old man. And in the coal bin all cocks are alike.” (*Naked Lunch* 45)

While the passage’s fixation on genital mutilation suggests an antipathy towards the reproduction of new life, rather, it is the repetition of this production that Burroughs attacks. Lydenberg argues “the only way out of the repressive channeling of conventional modes of reproduction is to break open the seamless enclosure of the work’s logocentric body, to liberate it by castration<sup>24</sup> or dismemberment,” a task that Burroughs accomplishes through the sexual and syntactical disfigurement of *Naked Lunch* (*Word Cultures* 163). Rather than eliminating markers of sexual difference, the dual castration Burroughs

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<sup>24</sup> “There are, as Barbra Johnson has pointed out, two modes of castration for Barthes: the negative mode which reduces plurality to structures of binary opposition and univocal readings, cutting the multiple braid of the text’s meanings; and a positive mode which functions as a cutting free, a cutting loose from all restrictive structures” (*Word Cultures* 163).

performs on 'Male and Female' functions to sever signifier from signified, and human sexuality from its morphological constraints. The inversion of traditional 'subject-verb-object' sentence structure in the passages opening line frustrates the reproduction of unified meaning through the destabilization of the syntactic identity. Without the interpretive boundaries of normative grammar to corral the sentence's signifiers into a familiar pattern it becomes unclear who or what is castrated. In the same sense, the textual amputation of genitalia uncouples the linguistic designations 'Male and Female' from their biological hosts, begging the question, "Who can't distinguish between the sexes?" Administering a positive mode of castration, Burroughs severs sexuality from its reproductive anchor, "dismantling modes of reproduction, both sexual and textual" (*Word Cultures* 156). Demanding that repressive sexual dualism "Come out in the open like my grandchild and meet thy unborn mother in dubious battle," Burroughs challenges the notion of genealogical causation that structures the very concept of reproduction. Freed from the deterministic confines of seamless linear progression, the reproductive order of operations breaks down, and "open[s] the way for new and monstrous births, for unthinkable transformations" (*Word Cultures* 156). In this sense, Burroughs is not opposed to life, only its controlled stagnation. In another sense, *Naked Lunch's* sexual drive is productive, as opposed to (re)productive.

The discursive technology of the obscenity trial functions to erect a panopticon of literary/legal judgment that, through the isolation of individual textual interpretations and authorial identities, controls whatever text might fall under its gaze. In turn, the gaze of the obscenity trial creates docile textual bodies that function to reproduce established aesthetic and ontological norms. In response, *Naked Lunch* fractures the panoptical lens of

literary discipline by breaking down the temporal/spatial walls of coherent, linear narrative that would otherwise isolate the many voices of the text. In doing so, Burroughs denies the critical addiction to metaphorical decoding which serves to objectify texts as something to be discovered and consumed. Relying on a relentless dedication to metonymic literalism, *Naked Lunch* reflects the Court's panoptic gaze, shining a light back at the structures of control that have shaped its critical reception. By placing the burden of visibility back on the legal system that banned it, *Naked Lunch* was eventually exonerated on appeal when the Massachusetts State Supreme Court reversed its initial obscenity ruling. Recalling the case, the prosecutor, Assistant Attorney General William Cowin, remarked, "As far as the merits were concerned I think the decision was correct then and is correct now. I do not believe very much is left of the First Amendment if its strength is so reduced that it does not protect a book of the quality of *Naked Lunch* from proscription." (Goodman 246).<sup>25</sup> While Cowin's change of heart appears admirable, it is strange, nonetheless, that a book that he once persuasively argued lacked any redeeming social value could, less than a decade later, be valuable enough to him to affirm his confidence in the strength of the First Amendment...That is, unless it was not Cowin's opinion that changed, but *Naked Lunch's* textual identity, instead.

### **"If you can't be just be arbitrary"**

Tracing the genealogy of obscenity from its earliest statutory manifestations in 17<sup>th</sup> century England outwards towards *Miller v. California*, a case many First Amendment scholars consider to signal the death of literary obscenity, there arises a discernable trend.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Michael Goodman on 26 April 1976.

Due in part to the progressive abstraction of obscenity criteria, the liberalization of national obscenity laws, championed by advocates of artistic freedom, has instead functioned to substitute a disciplinary model of censorship for a more insidious model based on control. While literature ceases to face any substantive obscenity regulation on the national and state level, Litowitz reminds, “Where the law is silent, the individual is not necessarily free. [...] New regulations are not to be confused with the clearly coercive premodern laws, but they are nonetheless coercive in a more subtle way” (Litowitz 80). Under this control the unblinking gaze of the panopticon is replaced by an inward gaze that is no longer dependent on the long dead obscenity court to impose boundaries and limits on literary production. An example of what Foucault terms a Negative Utopia, the humanitarian impulse to protect literature from censorship ultimately internalized the literary censor. Transitioning from the outright suppression of *Comstock’s* literary dungeon to the restrained discipline of *Roth’s* panopticon, the forward momentum of obscenity’s genealogical progress eventually served “to induce in the inmate [artist, critic, reader] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (*Discipline and Punish* 201). As such, the birth of literary control must be at the cost of the death of literary obscenity.

A particularly ironic manifestation of contemporary literary control, the recent disavowal of *Naked Lunch’s* once dominant autobiographical-drug-narrative has been replaced by a newly dominant interpretation; the complete lack of interpretability. In response to the poststructural rejection of the “Deposition”’s drug narrative by Burroughs

scholars, Lydenberg writes, “Even those critics who reject moral criteria as inappropriate for an understanding of Burroughs’ work tend to set up alternative hierarchies [...] These alternative goals are inevitably set in rigid binary opposition to moral aims” (*Word Cultures* 5). To assert that *Naked Lunch* completely lacks any means of interpretation is to perform a critical half-measure by simply substituting a presence for an absence. Analogous to transferring between Interzone’s Divisionists and Liquifactionalists, the contemporary critical denial of the drug narrative forms an equally dominant and constricting counter-interpretation. There exists, however, a middle ground of sorts, where the “Deposition”’s drug narrative is neither true nor false, but somehow both. Barthes lends the term “drift” to help describe this practice of holding multiple contradictory readings of a text simultaneously. Barthes explains, “Drifting occurs whenever I do not respect the whole, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language’s illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the intractable bliss that binds me to the text (to the world)” (*Pleasure of the Text* 18-19). On these grounds, the drug narrative holds a certain emergent potential. Recognizing that the signposts on the “Deposition”’s interpretive map yield only the most arbitrary of directions, the reader is free to follow any of *Naked Lunch*’s meandering and often dead-end passages, making and re-making the terrain as they proceed.

As such, it is possible to mutate the “Deposition”’s sober awakening into a powerful rhetorical device with the potential to expand, rather than confine the text. In contrasting the introduction of *Naked Lunch* to the remainder of the text, the narrative body can be characterized by the prevalence of its dream and intoxication symbology. Having already

framed the act of interpretation as an exercise in legal/literary judgment, Deleuze's commentary on the matter becomes particularly apt:

"The world of judgment establishes itself as in a dream... In the dream judgments are hurled into the void without encountering the resistance of a milieu that would subject them to the exigencies of knowledge or experience; this is why the question of judgment is first of all knowing whether one is dreaming or not. Moreover, Apollo is both the god of judgment and the god of dreams: it is Apollo who judges, who imposes limits and imprisons us in an organic forms, it is the dream the imprisons life within these forms in whose name life is judged...But once we leave the shores of judgment, we also repudiate the dream in favor of an 'intoxication,' like a high tide sweeping over us. What we seek in states of intoxication-drinks, drugs, ecstasies- is an antidote to both the dream and judgment. Whenever we turn from judgment towards justice, we enter into a dreamless sleep." ("To Have Done With Judgment" 130).

Awake and asleep, Deleuze's insomniac destabilizes the binary metaphor that grounds the "Deposition"'s claims to authoritative judgment and interpretive singularity.<sup>26</sup> Drifting between "the shores of judgment," Deleuze's insomniac, when met with the question of whether or not Burroughs was dreaming while writing *Naked Lunch*, is free to reply, "Gentlemen, I will slop a pearl" (*Naked Lunch* 78). If this answer seems like nonsense, it is.

In her book *Nonsense*, literary theorist, Susan Stewart, describes the titular term as, among other things, a limiting task. Outlining the parameters of a limiting task, Stewart references a study performed by noted sociologist Richard Hilbert, in which members of an undergraduate class were given "five versions of an event and a set of instructions to find out 'what really happened'" (Stewart 6).<sup>27</sup> Incapable of being unified under a single

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<sup>26</sup> "I awoke from The Sickness at the age of fort-five, calm and sane, and in reasonably good health except for a weakened liver and the look of borrowed flesh common to all who survive The Sickness" (*Naked Lunch* 7).

<sup>27</sup> Hilbert distinguishes "cases of sense-making in which members are able to resolve difficulties an contradictions and thus to document the objective and non-contradictory



chronology or interpretation, Hilbert's narrative fragments resemble the material components of *Naked Lunch*.<sup>28</sup> Mirroring the court's dismissal of the majority of the text of *Naked Lunch* as drug-induced gibberish, Hilbert's students declared the assignment to be nonsense. Met with a limiting event, the students, unable to assimilate Hilbert's fragments into their pre-existing interpretive order, classify the assignment as nonsense, marginalizing its alternative order outside the bounds of interpretation and common sense. Equally adrift, Deleuze's insomniac turns away from the judgment of interpretation towards the intoxication of justice. Placing justice in opposition to judgment, Deleuze argues, "Judgment prevents the emergence of any new mode of existence" (Deleuze 135). In this sense, justice, like Hilbert's fragments, represents a move away from the possibility of order towards the impossibility of nonsense.

Derrida advances a similar notion in *The Force of Law* when he claims that justice represents a deferred horizon towards which law strives but never reaches. Addressing an audience at Cordozo Law School<sup>29</sup> at the 1989 symposium, "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice," Derrida claimed, "Justice is an experience of the impossible. A will, a desire, a demand for justice whose structure wouldn't be an experience of aporia would have no chance to be what it is namely, a call for justice" (Litowitz 92-93). Reminiscent of Hilbert's definition of a limiting task, Derrida's call for justice is incompatible with the

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nature of Reality" from limiting tasks, which entail "the impossibility of resolving difficulty and contradiction as an essential impossibility in that all imaginable methods of reconciliation can only be imagined to fail" (Hilbert 26).

<sup>28</sup> Oliver Harris' recent genetic criticism convincingly argues that *Naked Lunch* was constructed from a series of letters sent by Burroughs to friends and colleagues. The epistolary fragments that were stitched together to form *Naked Lunch* lack the essential building blocks of traditional narrative, and refuse to be read as such.

<sup>29</sup> Coincidentally, *Naked Lunch*'s Boston defense attorney, Edward de Grazia, was a founding member of Benjamin N Cordozo Law School.

singularity of unified interpretation. Presenting his lecture entirely in English, Derrida insists “To address oneself in the language of the other is, it seems, the condition of all possible justice” (Litowitz 92). As a form of judgment, the act of literary interpretation necessitates the authoritative privileging of a single reading above, and at the expense of other potential readings. In this sense, justice opposes interpretation. Derrida’s insistence on the plurality of justice also contradicts the practice of legal interpretation, or law making. Presenting law as “a system of determinate rules,” Derrida identifies “a process of calculating between claims, a determination of proper adherence to rules, and the subsuming of particular cases under general rules,” as fundamental to the maintenance and reproduction of legal order (Litowitz 93). Mimicking the reductive function of metaphor, law subsumes individual behaviors under a set of restrictive criteria established by the authority of historical consistency, or precedent. As such, *Naked Lunch*’s rejection of metaphor as a means of producing interpretive textual identity stands as a rejection of Roth’s obscenity standards and more broadly, the law as a jurisprudential concept. Moreover, *Naked Lunch*’s insistent metonymic literalness operates as a nonsensical call for justice.

Loosely defined by a multiplicity of competing textual voices, nonsense eschews the vertical hierarchy of interpretation, in which one voice dominates and silences the rest. Favoring, instead, a horizontal arrangement, in which the voices of a text all speak simultaneously and no one voice is raised above the others, nonsense is a manifestation of Derridian justice. This cacophony of voices produced by justice’s horizontal structure echoes the discordant intoxication sought by Deleuze’s insomniac through drink, drugs, and ecstasy. A product of Burroughs’ own self-reported insomnia and opiate intoxication,

*Naked Lunch* is often discredited as nonsense. When considering the fragmentary presence/absence of characters, settings, and subplots in *Naked Lunch*, Lydenberg notes, “these intrusions do not represent the hierarchical domination of one voice over another, but a surgical attack on all structures of hierarchy, continuity, and control” (*Word Cultures* 13). Using brackets, italics, and other typographical incisions, Burroughs carves out literal space from the body of the text to create room for each individual voice to resonate. However, when every voice is allowed to speak, no single voice can be heard. In this sense, the justice of nonsense breaks the law of interpretation.

Unlawfully just, the conflicted status of *Naked Lunch* corroborates Derrida’s view of “justice as something that ‘exceeds’ the law and can perhaps even contradict the law in extreme cases” (Litowitz 92). Concerned with this very conflict, *Naked Lunch*’s obscenity trials sought to determine whether the text could be contorted in such a way so as to support metaphorical interpretation. Without this ability, *Naked Lunch* would have been found obscene and in violation of the law. Instead, through a subtle program of textual marginalization, the Massachusetts State Supreme Court silenced the many voices of *Naked Lunch*, baring those of the addict and his drug polemic. The blatant injustice of this decision calls into question the larger historical meta-narrative that marks *Attorney General v. A Book Named ‘Naked Lunch’* as the beginning of a gradual liberalization of obscenity law.

Critical theorists specializing in the field of ‘law and literature,’ often attempt to demonstrate how the law influences literary interpretation. *Naked Lunch*, however, provides a useful model to better understand how literary interpretation influences the law. While Derrida suggests that no legal judgment can meet the criteria of justice, *Naked Lunch* offers a solution to this impasse, reminding “we see God through our assholes in the

flash bulb of orgasm...Through these orifices transmute your body...the way OUT is the way IN" (*Naked Lunch* 180). Rather than advocating a futile attempt to avoid interpretation outright, *Naked Lunch* pushes readers to acknowledge the control they exert over the text, to consume the text with this knowledge in mind, to eat a naked lunch. Divorced from the veil of metaphor, the reader of *Naked Lunch* is made aware of the interpretive violence they commit against the text, forcibly reshaping Burroughs' fictive landscape with each reading. This mindful shaping, however, is not an act of judgment, but an act of decision. Borrowing the term from Deleuze, "A decision is not a judgment, nor is it the organic consequence of a judgment; it springs vitally from a whirlwind of forces that leads us into combat. It resolves the combat without suppressing or ending it" ("To Have Done With Judgment" 134). Rather than locking the text into static identity, decisive reading self-consciously mutates the textual body, continuously creating and destroying its meaning. Stating, "*Naked Lunch* is a blueprint, a How-To Book," Burroughs illustrates the effect of interpretive decision by once more returning to the literal (*Naked Lunch* 176):

"The physical changes were slow at first, then jumped forward in black klunks, falling through his slack tissue, washing away the human lines... In his place of total darkness mouth and eyes are one organ that leaps forward to snap with transparent teeth... but no organ is constant as regards either to function or position... sex organs sprout anywhere... rectums open, defecate and close... the entire organism changes color and consistency in split second adjustments." (*Naked Lunch* 22).

Applied to legal interpretation, *Naked Lunch's* blueprint suggests the way out of the conflict between law and justice is through excess, orgasm, or bliss. Barthes describes a subject who is able to simultaneously hold in consideration the readerly text of law and the writerly text of justice as "anachronic," or nonsensical. The anachronic subject "contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture... and in the

destruction of that culture: he enjoys the consistency of selfhood and seeks its loss”

(*Pleasure of the Text* 14). To practice the law as one would read *Naked Lunch* is to engage in jurisprudential play, to perform the limiting task of interpretation without reciprocation, to reject legal positivism. If *Naked Lunch* prompts its audience to read as a writer, perhaps justice similarly requires legal professionals to practice the law as if the law were being practiced upon them.

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